

VOLUNTEER RETENTION IN THE DEWITT TOWNSHIP FIRE DEPARTMENT

Executive Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer recruitment and retention is an important topic to most volunteer and paid-on-call fire departments. Dewitt Township was no different than any other fire department in regards to wanting to find how to keep their personnel longer. Over the past three years there have been several paid-on-call personnel who have left the fire department. While their reasons for leaving might be evident, no structured exit interview was conducted to determine the reason for leaving. The problem was that the department was uninformed as to underlying issues, if any, with these employees as to why they left and what could have been done to retain them. The purpose of this paper was to better understand why paid-on-call personnel resigned from the department. The research methodology used in this paper was descriptive methodology.

The following questions were asked of former firefighters during one on one interviews.

1) What were your reasons for leaving the fire department? What circumstances, events, or conditions led you to leave the fire department?

2) What types of programs or conditions could have been in place that would have allowed you to stay on the department longer? Were there any programs or conditions in place that you found helpful or that could be improved?

To research this material a literature review was conducted reviewing many articles on retention along with recruitment. Along with the literature review five (5) interviews were conducted of personnel who left the fire department within the past year.

The results of the research indicate that time and training were key factors for volunteer retention. The allocation of time between work, family, and volunteer fire service were critical causes for volunteers to resign or participate very little with the fire

department. Results of this study also indicate that the needs of the volunteers must be met.

The recommendations derived from these results indicate that in order to retain personnel in a volunteer fire department periodic surveys need to be conducted, along with exit interviews. A personnel committee should also be formed to conduct applicant interviews, exit interviews, member surveys, and make recommendations to improve retention.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past three (3) years there have been several volunteer/paid-on-call personnel who have left the DeWitt Township Fire Department. While their reasons for leaving might be evident, no structured exit interview was conducted to determine the reason for leaving. The problem is that the department is therefore, uninformed as to underlying issues with these employees as to why they left and what could be done to retain them. The purpose of this paper was to better understand why volunteer personnel resigned from the department. The research methodology used in this paper is descriptive methodology.

Literature on the subject of volunteer recruitment and retention was researched along with interviewing five (5) former firefighters. While recruitment and retention tend to go hand in hand, this paper will strive to focus basically on retention. Two questions were asked of the interviewees:

1) What were your reasons for leaving the fire department? What circumstances, events, or conditions led you to leave the fire department?

2) What types of programs or conditions could have been in place that would have allowed you to stay on the department longer? Were there any programs or conditions in place that you found helpful or that could be improved?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Recruitment and especially retention of volunteer fire fighters is important to any municipality that relies on volunteer fire fighters to provide emergency services. This is the case in DeWitt Township. This department has been a completely volunteer department since its inception in 1965. Not until 1994 did the township hire its first full-time employee. This position was as Fire Administrator. After the Volunteer Fire Chief retired in 1997, the title of the Fire Administrator was changed to Fire Chief. One full-time person does not make a fire department. DeWitt Township continues to rely on volunteer personnel.

As with most departments, personnel come and go; but in the past year more people were leaving than were coming onto the department. The department lost nearly one-third of its roster in one year. That put a lot of strain on the remaining personnel to maintain services. To relieve that strain a recruitment drive was conducted and the roster increased to nearly full strength.

From an organizational viewpoint, it is important that this department and township study why these volunteers are leaving and ways to retain their services longer. This subject area relates to the topic of problem solving as found in the Executive Fire Officer Program class on Executive Leadership. This research paper also fulfills the final requirement in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There are many articles on volunteer recruitment and retention. While this paper will focus on volunteer retention, like other literature, volunteer recruitment will be mentioned because of the codependency between recruitment and retention.

From the 1997 statistics for the State of Michigan there are 1,024 fire departments in the state. There are 22,000 volunteers and 8,547 career firefighters that staff these departments. As can be seen by these statistics the volunteer firefighter is the backbone of the fire service in Michigan. This is true throughout the United States where there are over one million volunteer firefighters.

If we and the nation are to maintain this volunteer structure we must understand why volunteers are leaving the volunteer ranks and how we can keep them longer.

The face of the volunteer fire service is changing. There was a time when serving as a member of the volunteer fire and rescue service was something to do in the community. We joined because our friends or relatives were members. It was a chance for excitement and an opportunity to be a part of a group and sharing the fellowship. The action of fire fighting and emergency medical service was also appealing (White, 1997, p.14).

That dedication by the residents of the community is declining as society changes.

As society becomes more mobile, people tend to move more and may not establish community roots. A great portion of the population appears to be moving from the metropolitan areas to the suburban and rural areas of our various communities. As they arrive they have certain expectations from their fire department, such as high levels

of service and fast response. These are services they received in the metropolitan areas and are services they expect in their new community.

These changes in society also transcend into the fire service. “Volunteer services have undergone tremendous change in their fundamental mission. Thirty years ago, most volunteer fire departments were simply fire suppression forces” (Clay, 1998, p.17).

Training at the time was 30-40 hours of initial training followed by a few monthly meetings and drills. Departments existed due to their own fund raising efforts and there were often waiting lists of people who wanted to join these departments.

The early 1970’s brought a change to the fire service. The public began to demand different kinds of services from their fire departments. Both the career fire department and the volunteer fire department were expected to provide the same types of services. These services included special rescue such as confined space and high angle as well as paramedic services. This was followed by the demand for further services such as fire prevention, inspection and code compliance due to increases in fires and the need to determine the cause. Next came the demand for responses to hazardous materials incidents and mitigation of the same.

Many departments today have chosen to accept these challenges while other departments have opted not to. Rather than providing all of these services, they are picking and choosing the type of service that they will provide. These choices may be due to citizen demands or by the available talents of the individuals who are on the fire department.

There is also a change in the profile of the volunteer firefighter. Traditionally the volunteer firefighter was a male. They were local businessmen who would close up their

business when the fire whistle blew. They felt that this was their civic duty and responded accordingly. The husband that worked all day outside of the community covered nighttime responses. Many times the husband would respond to the fire station during an alarm, while the wife took care of the children and the household duties.

Today this scenario has changed. The local businessman cannot afford to close his doors for the time needed to mitigate the incident. The wife also works full-time which means there may be no one to watch the children, if the husband left to respond. Today, the wife may also want to be a volunteer herself. This new generation of young adults does not appear to have the same commitment to civic duty and pride as their fathers. The waiting list to join the fire department is virtually non-existent today.

“Finding and keeping people who are interested in delivering the level of fire protection that the public demands is becoming increasingly difficult” (Stittsburg, 1994, p.20). If this pattern continues, the level of service will deteriorate. It also may indicate that taxes will need to rise to be able to pay for career personnel.

Besides societal impacts there are other factors affecting the volunteer fire service. Volunteers, like everyone else, only have so many hours in the day to work, be with their family, and participate in other activities. The volunteer fire service impacts on this time constraint because of increased incident responses and more stringent training standards. Other factors that affect the volunteer fire department are poor leadership, improper management, changes in the internal structure of the department, and the reluctance to recruit what some would call outsiders into their organization.

“If volunteer departments are to be successful in meeting today’s recruitment challenge, they must adapt to a changing America. Setting goals and initiating strategies

to realize them can help departments retain and recruit active volunteer members”

(Goldfeder, 1992, p.10). The leaders of these departments must give as much attention to retaining present members as to recruiting new members. As alluded to earlier, the volunteer fire service is competing with a common restraint for everyone - time.

Therefore, it is important that we, as leaders, “create conditions that will encourage and enable members to satisfy the needs that compelled them to join the fire department in the first place” (Cimino, 1983, p.12).

Reasons For Leaving

As mentioned in the previous section, there are many factors affecting volunteer fire departments. This section will expand upon the reasons volunteers leave fire departments.

As society has changed so has the values of society. The working absent father is becoming more involved in the raising of his children. With both parents working, they are now sharing more of the family responsibilities.

What was once considered our civic duty, to serve as a volunteer on the fire department, is now considered someone else’s responsibility. Our values that led us to serve the community are now a “me” value. This change in values cannot be totally held responsible for volunteer retention. Society has changed economically as well.

The economic family structure allowed for the family to be supported by one working parent. Today that is not the case. In many families both husband and wife are working to make ends meet. Their work often leads to working more than 40 hours. Many of the younger members of the department are seeking work outside of the community they live in, which takes more of their time in commuting to work. Both the

numbers of hours working and commuting time take away from time that is allotted to other activities. Also, economics is not allowing the employer to allow his/her employees to leave work when an alarm for emergency services is received. What may have been an accepted practice is no longer economically feasible. Economics has also allowed the family to have a summer home on the lake. This means less time in their community to serve on the fire department.

The services that the fire department provides today have expanded tremendously. The fire department use to be just for socializing and putting out fires. Now many departments respond to emergency medical calls. This has increased the amount of time that is spent in training personnel. Many people cannot accept this time requirement. A new recruit in the State of Michigan must obtain a minimum of Fire Fighter I within the first two years of joining a fire department. This is 147 hours of training. Many departments are training their personnel to the Fire Fighter II level. This is an additional 78 hours. On top of that, if the volunteer department provides emergency medical services they must be trained to the minimum of a medical first responder. This is approximately 60 hours. In a structured class setting this training can last from six to nine months with classes two nights a week and with some all day Saturday training sessions.

As noted, training can be an obstacle for retaining personnel. Not only has it grown in duration, but also it has grown in complexity. Personnel must obtain professional certifications to comply with various standards and then must be continually recertified. This is quite a commitment for a new member to a volunteer department.

Besides the training, there is also the response to emergency incidents. Being a full service fire department means an increase in responses. The major increase in

emergency responses is due to responding to medical emergencies. This can be anywhere from 60 to 80 percent of the total responses made by a department. If the fire department does not have a large roster, this puts a strain on the existing members. Many will burn out and leave because of the demand on their time. The end result is fewer people doing more work. Also, members who were once the backbone of the department are now older and are forced to reduce their level of participation.

Politics is another cause of the volunteer problem. Many volunteer ambulance and fire departments compete with one another for personnel, money and equipment. Instead of working together, they squabble over responsibilities. These arguments can lead to poor public relations and unwanted interference from town government officials (Sharp, 1989, p.49).

Retention

Now that an overview has been presented as to why people are leaving the volunteer ranks, let us look at ways to retain volunteer personnel. "Once upon a time, an opportunity to develop leadership qualities, prestige, a sense of belonging, learning and using knowledge and skills, satisfaction, and a sense of achievement for a job well done were sufficient motivators for an individual to belong to a fire or rescue department" (White, 1997, p.15). Today it is more complicated. The things that need to be looked at for retention are the volunteer's basic needs, incentives, and proper organizational structure.

Every person has a basic need to feel important, accomplish important things, and to grow as an individual. We all do. The volunteer fire department, if managed properly, provides for these basic needs of its members.

These needs include:

- A sense of belonging - a fire department provides a camaraderie, its members work as a “team,” they depend on each other for their lives and work.
- Achievement - to put a fire out is enormously satisfying, and immediately reinforcing.
- Self-respect - comes from learning and achieving competence in the unique, difficult task of firefighting.
- Challenge - Fighting fires is dangerous, exciting, and the firefighters win.
- Recognition - if the community, city officials are proud of the fire department and let the members know it.
- Having fun and enjoy life - the fire department team promotes this (Richardson, 1986,p.43-44).

Again it is important to praise volunteers for their work and accomplishments.

Most volunteers do not join the fire department for financial gain. Being a volunteer is not a career, but something they desire to do for their community. “The most effective method of showing your appreciation of their efforts is through direct praise. People want to be told they are doing a good job and are appreciated” (Conner, 1990, p.53).

Providing incentives is another way of retaining volunteers. There are many types of incentives and they may or may not be appropriate for every volunteer fire department. “Incentive programs for volunteers are sometimes expensive and do not always increase the number of members. Good management realizes that the cost of the incentive package must remain below what it would cost for paid personnel” (Connery, 1990, p.53).

One financial incentive is a retirement program. This retirement program is called a length of service incentive plan or a length of service award plan (LOSAP). These retirement pension programs are for volunteers who meet defined minimum service requirements.

Under the length of service incentive plan, those who meet training requirements can become eligible for 24 hour a day life insurance, while on the job, and supplemental retirement income, upon retiring from the department. There is generally a three-year vestment period to qualify for this program.

To qualify under LOSAP, members receive points for training, responses to calls, and station stand-by. Those members who receive over the minimum required points get one year of credit towards the pension plan. After receiving a minimum number of years of credits, volunteers become eligible for a monthly pension, which will begin at a specified age.

The outcome of these plans will vary from community to community. Depending on the type of plan initiated and the minimum qualifications imposed, members may obtain various incomes. Programs have resulted in retirement incomes between \$50 and \$700 per month. Some plans may allow current members to buy years of service credits towards their retirement. Before initiating such a plan, the municipality should contact the IRS and their municipal attorney for regulations.

Aside from the pension programs listed above some communities may provide their volunteers life insurance or tax breaks. Housing subsidies are also used to bring volunteers into the community or to help young members who are starting a family and trying to get established. Another method is to provide room and board for single

members. Whatever method is used, the cost is important but will likely be small compared to hiring career personnel.

Another type of incentive is through rewarding the volunteers. This should be done at an awards ceremony. This ceremony can be conducted at a dinner or a picnic. These rewards are generally plaques, trophies, or length of service pins. Another award that can be recognized during these events is a firefighter of the year award. Some departments give out rings and watches for years of service and retirement. Whatever method is used it is important to make this an important community recognized function and get the press involved. These types of functions add a tremendous amount of value to an organization.

To make these recognition's effective it is important that they be well managed. Criteria must be developed with established objectives, which eliminates favoritism. By allowing the membership to participate in the process it is more meaningful to the fire fighter that wins an award, as well as those members who select an honoree.

It must be remembered that incentives themselves do not ensure retention. We all remember those readings from college that proclaim that money and its pecuniary cousins are not motivators. However, incentives can be powerful signals that the community actually respects the commitment the volunteers are making and is willing to make it easier for them to volunteer. Showing that you care is a motivator (Clay, 1998, p.20).

There are other incentives that, while not putting money into the pockets of the members, will cost the municipality money. The main thing is to provide the equipment necessary for members to respond and perform their job. This equipment includes such

basic items as personalized personal protective clothing and facepieces. This also includes pagers or monitors to alert the volunteers. Other items that could be provided are uniforms or department T-shirts.

Satisfying basic needs and providing incentives will be lost if the organization is not organized and managed properly. Good leadership is the key to a successful organization such as a fire department. The fire department must be run like a business with planning and goals. In a well-run department members will want to learn and develop. They will want to take on responsibility and advance in the department. It is leadership's responsibility to identify the training needs and make that training available to all members, young and old.

The following activities can help leaders retain personnel and make them a part of the organization. Like any organization it is important to have written guidelines and information about the organization. New members after they are welcomed and given a tour of the station are generally lost, because they have little information about the department. A packet should be developed that will provide new members with all of the pertinent information about the department. The following information should be included the packet: standard operating guidelines, benefits package, training schedule, schedules of all fire department activities, duties and responsibilities of members, rosters, department history, and any other pertinent information.

Personnel management is also important. Volunteer officers may not have any personnel/leadership training. It is important that all officers and those who aspire to be an officer be given management training opportunities. These training seminars should be designed for all volunteer officers, including the chief.

Nothing can damage an organization more than a lack of communication with personnel. It is important that communication be timely and the method of communication be effective. One method that has proven effective is a department newsletter. The newsletter can be done in-house and can include information such as meeting highlights, policy reviews, training programs, and personnel information. Members should be able to contribute to the newsletter at any time. Other methods of communication are through use of bulletin boards, written policies and procedures, and through a mentor program. The mentor program connects a long time member with a new member. The mentor acts as a guide and answers questions for the new member.

The department may want to establish a personnel committee. This committee would review personnel policies and make sure the department has an open recruitment policy. Due to the increased demand for services it may not be feasible for personnel to do everything. The department may want to look at specialization where personnel perform specified functions. Specialization could include administrative and support functions such as fire prevention education, inspections, communications, clerical, and maintenance.

When planning sessions are held it is important that all personnel be provided the opportunity to be involved. During the sessions brainstorming is important for looking at all issues. This also improves internal communications.

Finally quality assurance is important. Adequate levels of service must be provided to the residents. To do this it is important that criteria be developed and evaluated and those members follow the established criteria.

Conclusion

Each organization is made up of people with their own interests and motivation, working to serve the community. In the article Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers, Chief Steve Meyer (1990) put motivation into perspective when he wrote, “We cannot ‘motivate’ someone. We can only offer the environment in which to become motivated” (p.72).

For a department to be successful the entire membership must participate in volunteer activities. They also need to participate in problems solving activities by analyzing information objectively. “Decisions and actions made without clear definition of roles and responsibilities results in subjective decisions. Only when facts are gathered and analyzed can we identify problems and objective solutions to those problems” (Good, 1996, p.3).

Analyzing the various retention ideas may lead the department to reevaluate its recruitment process. One method to use in recruitment is profiling. Chief Nyle Zikmund (1996) conducted a survey of a suburban metropolitan area, which resulted in the following profile for a person to recruit that would stay with the department for an extended period of time. He indicated that the ideal recruit is married at the time of joining, owns his/her own home, and is on the average 27.4 years of age.

There are many ideas and concepts to retaining volunteers. Each department can learn from its own mistakes and from ideas shared by others. Whatever process is used the department must remember to focus on its people. “People join the volunteer fire service to fulfill basic human needs that are not met in their regular careers. If a department can meet those needs, retention and recruitment will be less problematic. One

thing is certain: The problems of retention and recruitment need to be continually addressed if the volunteer fire service is to remain an American tradition” (Fireman’s Journal, 1994, p.82)

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

The following are comments made by five former volunteer firefighters as recorded during personal interviews. The following research questions were asked of each interviewee and their answers are recorded numerically for each question.

- 1) What were your reasons for leaving the fire department? What circumstances, events, or conditions led you to leave the fire department?
- 2) What types of programs or conditions could have been in place that would have allowed you to stay on the department longer? Were there any programs or conditions in place that you found helpful or that could be improved?

Chris Wheeler personal interview 03-12-98

1. His major reason for leaving was to advance his career opportunity. A full-time position with a career fire department opened up and he accepted it. He also had too many things going on in his life. He was working part-time jobs and going to school. This did not allow him to participate in incident responses and training like he wanted to.
2. Chris said that the training was beneficial and the interaction during training. He thought it was good that at the end of the month run statistics were posted on the bulletin board. This allowed personnel to see how many incidents they made or didn't make during the month.

He also indicated that it was helpful to know that certain days were designated for training and that training didn't just happen once in awhile. Also during training the training officer made sure every one got a chance to do the tasks. The firefighters just didn't stand around and watch, everyone got to participate.

Pat McVey personal interview 03-12-98

1. He left mainly to go to a full time career fire department. He felt that working on a career department would take too much of his time to allow him to commit time to a volunteer department. He was spreading himself too thin. He wanted to make the runs and training but could not. He felt that he was taking a slot that someone else might need and he did not want to do that.

2. In comparing to his current job he stated what he liked best was the cross training that allowed him to do all aspects of the job. In his current job, he is assigned to ride the ambulance or the engine for a long time before he is allowed to be the engineer. In the volunteer department he might fight fires on one run and be the driver/pump operator on the next run. He also appreciated the ability to come to the station any

time he wanted to train and work on apparatus. He said that the training and fire fighting experiences of the volunteer department was helpful. He was able to respond to more fires as a volunteer than he is as a career firefighter.

One of the negative aspects he observed was during medical responses. He saw that some of the fire department personnel were reluctant to get involved. It seemed as though they were not comfortable in evaluating and treating patients. He said there needs to be more involvement in EMS.

Dennis Howland personal interview 03-17-98

1. Dennis left because of having trouble dealing with a recent medical run. He had a problem dealing with medical runs for some time. He thought about doing what some people do and that is pick and choose what runs to respond to. He did not feel that that was the proper thing to do since we require new personnel to be cross-trained and to be able to respond to medical and fire runs.
2. He felt that more awareness of critical incident stress (CIS) by other personnel was important for long term service personnel. He indicated that he would have stayed on as a firefighter if he could respond to fire runs only. He said that one thing we should do is get a speaker to come and talk about critical incident stress debriefing (CISD). The problem Dennis found was the ability to get a CISD team to come in. Trying to accommodate their various work schedules did not allow them to come to talk to personnel.

Another way to possibly keep personnel longer is to have enough personnel on hand so that they do not feel obligated to make every run. He also stated that we are more apt to hold onto local personnel who are not interested in firefighting as a career. If they are looking for a career in the fire service then they will be short timers.

Dennis stated that the department needs to look more to a family atmosphere. The department needs things to bring the whole department together instead of having cliques.

Pat Zeeb personal interview 3-18-98

1. Pat left the department because it became too far to drive to the fire station. This is because a new expressway was built across the road he lives on and now the road dead ends at the expressway. Before the expressway was built he only had to drive five miles to the fire station. Because of the road closing that distance increased to nine miles.
2. Pat felt that sometimes too much time was spent watching training videos. He wanted more practical experience. He realized that training videos were necessary but practical training was more important than classroom. He said that if you are going to fight a fire then you need to do it. There is more benefit out of doing rather than watching videos. If the day is crummy, such as bad weather, then have classroom activities. If there is good weather then get outside to train.

Matt Sehlke personal interview 3-19-98

1. Matt left because he didn't have enough time to commit and he lived too far away from the fire station. He was working a number of part-time jobs.
2. Matt said he did learn a lot from the senior volunteers. They were helpful on the fire scene. They were also helpful with after fire critiques. This help increased his knowledge. He said it is difficult to keep volunteer firefighters because they are looking for a career move.

PROCEDURES

The purpose of this paper was to find out why volunteer fire fighters were leaving the fire department. To do this it was determined that some basic questions would need to be asked of people who had left the DeWitt Township Fire Department. It would also be necessary to read literature related to volunteer retention to find out the experiences and results of others. Much of the literature for this review was obtained at the library at the National Fire Academy.

Once the interview questions were developed, the researcher contacted five people who had left the fire department within the last year. They were invited in for a personal interview to find out why they left and if there was anything that could be done to retain volunteers longer. These interviews were conducted over a period of one week.

The questions asked were intended to be as open ended as possible and to allow as much input as possible from interviewees. The basic question asked was what were your reasons for leaving the fire department? To expand upon that question, they were also asked what circumstances, events, or conditions led them to leave the fire department? The follow up question was also two fold. It was asked if there were any programs or conditions in place that they found helpful or that could be improved and what typed of programs or conditions could have been in place that would have allowed them to stay on the department longer?

Assumptions & Limitations

It was assumed that the interviewees would answer the questions truthfully. A limiting factor was the number of persons interviewed. While other former members could have been interviewed over the phone, the reader should be made aware of why they were not contacted. Those former members that were not contacted left the

department to join career departments. They were young and it was their goal to become career firefighters.

For purposes of clarity it should be mentioned that the term volunteer included more than what may be concluded as a true volunteer. In this paper the term volunteer also includes the paid-on-call firefighter.

RESULTS

The results of the paper show a definite correlation between the answers found in the literature review and answers by those interviewed. The main item that was touched upon was the element of time. Three of those interviewed stated that time was a big factor in the volunteer fire department, but was not the main reason they left. Like in the literature, their time was split among many activities. Being young, three interviewees were working multiple full and part-time jobs, commuting to these jobs, which for one interviewee was a hour trip one way; and continuing their education, along with trying to participate as a volunteer fire fighter.

Training was mentioned by most of the interviewees. Their response though was not negative but positive. This relates to an organized leadership in providing a meaningful experience.

Three of the interviewees either mentioned their intention to join or have already joined career fire departments. As mentioned in the literature, an incentive for staying as a volunteer is the opportunity for a career position. This only works if the department is a combination department staffed with career personnel.

One item that was mentioned by an interviewee was in regards to critical incident stress (CIS). While the literature talked about assistance for the volunteer, it did not

mention anything about CIS. This would indicate that some focus should be placed on personnel support programs.

There appears to be many factors involved in having a good retention plan. No matter what the plan is or factors used, studies indicate that leadership is a main ingredient to retention. A good leader will be able to constantly reassess the needs of the volunteers and develop and implement programs to fulfill those needs, in a cost-effective manner.

DISCUSSION

The study results appear to be consistent with the literature. The main theme is time. There are just not enough hours in a day to be able to do all of the things people want or need to do. Three of those interviewed were young people in their early 20's. These young people exhibit the same characteristics that this researcher has noticed in most young new volunteers. They say that they want to participate and will respond to training and incidents, but that doesn't happen. The reason it doesn't happen is because they are interested in getting onto a career fire department. To do that they need to have certain certifications. This means continuing their education. This equates to many months of continued medical training to become a paramedic.

Education though is not the only factor keeping them from participating as a volunteer. Because they are young, they do not have an established residence or job. To afford school they work two to three and sometimes four part-time jobs. This does not allow them any free time to participate in fire department activities. They get on the volunteer department for experience but do not have the time to get that experience.

The majority of the volunteers who have left the DeWitt Township Fire Department in the past years have left to join career departments. While it may appear to be a negative, it possibly can be turned into a positive. If people see that volunteers are able to obtain career positions elsewhere, then it may entice others to join the volunteer department. They see that department as being recognized by the career department as a good source for quality personnel.

An implication here though is that this volunteer department becomes a training ground for the career department. As mentioned above it can be a positive, but it is also a negative. A lot of time is taken to train new volunteers and then the benefits to that training are realized elsewhere, instead of the community in which they were trained. It is frustrating for management to put all of this effort into new personnel, and then to have them leave within two to three years after joining.

While the department does not want to discriminate, it may need to reevaluate its membership profile when interviewing and hiring future volunteer firefighters. The pool of volunteers may be smaller, but maybe the retention rate will be longer. As leaders and chief officers, this researcher believes that if profiling is used in recruitment, we must be careful in our evaluation of candidates. We must be careful that we do not discriminate against any candidate.

The premise here, it appears, is to get every department member involved in the process. This takes good leadership skills and organization. This can translate into a stronger organization that will take care of the needs of its members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is suggested that some organizational changes be made so that management can better understand the needs of the volunteers. One change would be to form a cross sectional committee of the department that would become a personnel committee. They would be responsible for interviewing new applicants, conducting exit interviews, review the results of the comments made from the exit interviews, and review personnel policies. After analysis they would then make recommendations for hiring, personnel policy changes, and organizational improvement for recruitment and retention. Periodically the committee would also conduct surveys of the present members. These surveys would help to determine if the needs of the members are being met.

While change is encouraged to help improve volunteer retention, it is also important that the department continue to reinforce incentives and awards presently in affect. These awards are the Firefighter of the Year Award and the employee recognition given by the Township Board.

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